

BOOK REVIEWS

Creative Exchange: a Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience. Victor Anderson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. 192 pp. \$22.00 paper. (Reviewed by Monica A. Coleman, Claremont School of Theology)

Although the subtitle of the book refers to a “constructive theology,” and the author names the project a “pragmatic theory of religious experience,” in his recent book *Creative Exchange*, Victor Anderson offers readers a much-needed African American philosophy of religion. Anderson addresses traditional topics or “problems” within the philosophy of religion: religious knowledge, suffering and evil, God, and human meaning. Although the focus is on African American cultural experiences, Anderson constructs a philosophy of religion applicable well beyond any particular community.

Creative Exchange hinges around Anderson’s concept of “the grotesque.” In fact, the concept of “the grotesque” is so central that the book could aptly be named “black grotesqueries.” In short, “the grotesque” connotes that any given situation, concept, or picture always has more than one dimension or interpretation. Using the popular illusions of the pictures that can appear as a duck/ rabbit and a human face/ saxophonist, Anderson demands that we look at every situation for its depth, complexity, and multiple readings. There is no one or clear perspective to a situation. The grotesque represents the ability to live with ambiguity.

Embracing “the grotesque” highlights and leaves unresolved differences that appear contradictory. That makes both the objects and our perception of them ambiguous. Now there are more possibilities for creative ways of understanding the object, which necessarily disrupts our tendencies to synthesize and render clear and unitary that which is indeed absurd and complex. We must understand experience through the lens of the grotesque because, as Anderson rightly asserts, how we understand experience “will determine what gets emphasized as defining aspects of African American religious experience” (9). As a pragmatist, Anderson asserts that religion is in our experiences more than in our doctrinal statements of belief. For black theological work, the grotesque continually asserts that black experience is not reducible to experiences of suffering and humiliation.

The grotesque is not just the guiding theme of Anderson’s work; it is also characteristic of Anderson’s method and argumentation. Anderson engages his philosophical, theological, and cultural interlocutors with the same complexity

and concretization that the grotesque requires. Throughout his work, Anderson acknowledges how he is profoundly influenced by pragmatic naturalism, liberal theology, and African American hermeneutical philosophy and cultural studies. Anderson often presents opposing views, striking forth with a critical and constructive middle way filtered through the particularities of social and personal narratives.

In the first chapter, Anderson proposes a relational understanding of race. Anderson draws upon Edward Farley's concept of "deep symbol" to navigate between the poles of race as a biological necessity and race as a social construction. Anderson does not attempt to explain race; he prefers to offer thick descriptions of the power race holds. He does this through an engagement with two schools of thought within black philosophy represented by Lucius Outlaw and Anthony Appiah. The former perspective views race as a socio-cultural description of black experience and believes that black philosophy should disclose black experience and advocate for freedom. The latter sees the diversity among persons of shared "race" as providing no empirical basis that can justify the standing that race maintains in contemporary society.

Anderson concludes that race has relational power, but is as arbitrary as any other convention by which people negotiate their environments. Drawing on specific African folktales, Anderson illustrates that race can create a *sensus communis*; it can enlarge individuals beyond essentialism and create affections and sympathy that can fund real community—the manners, ways, customs, and practices that lead towards Beloved Community. This chapter is significant less for its conclusions, and more for the ways that Anderson seriously engages black philosophy and specific African narratives, a move rarely seen in black theological work.

In chapter two, Anderson discusses religious knowledge in African American religious studies through a return to another critique he introduced in *Beyond Ontological Blackness*—the slave narrative project within the black theological academy. While Anderson appreciates and underscores the need to include African American history and culture in contemporary black theological construction, he critiques the slave narrative project for its attempt to draw a clear line between the content of the narratives of ex-slaves and the faith views of slaves, and then another clear line from those faith views to the ideology of black liberation theology.

Not only are there historical, literary, and political reasons that render such transparency problematic, but the ideology of the project itself reveals how alienated much of the black theological academy is from the lives of contemporary black religious and cultural life. Compared to the ideology of black power and black liberation asserted by this school of thought, most people in

black churches today are “evangelical in faith, liberal in politics and reformist in social action” (68). The slave narrative project violates Anderson’s mandate of the grotesque. Referring to the work of Charles Long, Anderson believes that the transparency of the slave narrative project must be balanced with an opacity that cannot see through the lens of historical distance so clearly. Only then can the particularities and creativity of African American cultural life be justly incorporated into African American religious studies.

In the third chapter, Anderson first addresses the problem of evil and suffering by asserting that it is a modernist problem. In contrast to the work of womanist theologian Delores Williams and black theologian Anthony Pinn, Anderson asserts that redemptive suffering *is* a viable interpretation of human experiences of suffering and evil. Anderson agrees with Williams’s naming of surrogacy and servanthood as at least partly constitutive of African American Christian women’s social witness, but he challenges the way she presents the moral character of God. That is, Williams argues that God does not always liberate African American women from their experiences of surrogacy and servanthood; in fact, God sometimes occasions these experiences in order to help African American women survive.

Pinn, on the other hand, states that redemptive suffering requires belief in a God who intends (be it for pedagogical or moral purposes) the suffering and pain of black people. Pinn finds that kind of God untenable and rejects belief in the existence of God. Anderson critiques Pinn for assuming that redemptive suffering is a theological doctrine. Although redemptive suffering can be viewed theocentrically, it needn’t be.

Anderson agrees with Pinn and Williams about making humanity responsible for the evil that arises from human intervention in the world. He also agrees that a concept of redemptive suffering that sees a causal relationship between suffering and good valorizes suffering. Nevertheless, Anderson believes there are valuable forms of transcendence in the symbol of redemptive suffering when it is defined as “a human possibility that is copresent in the creative exchange of suffering and arises as an emergent potentiality of the world framed by finitude and transcendence” (81). Anderson uses the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Howard Thurman to stress the “responsibilist” modality of redemptive suffering “in which in and through such suffering there is an exchange of powers, capacities of worth and value that issue in faith, hope and love, not because of evil and suffering but as copresent in suffering” (108).

Anderson’s attempt to adhere to the symbol of redemptive suffering can be helpful because this language is important to many persons of faith. However the most popular concept of redemptive suffering—that Anderson, Pinn, and Williams reject—is tied to a causal relationship between suffering and value.

Anderson's redefinition of redemptive suffering retains the nomenclature, but changes the substance of the concept enough to render new naming justifiable, at the least, and perhaps even necessary.

In the fourth chapter, Anderson takes on the issue of God by engaging Howard Thurman, Royce, and Wieman. Anderson discusses Thurman's mysticism by describing how Thurman asserts the a priority of religious experience through a radical inner subjectivity that affirms *that* God is and *how* God is. While Anderson appreciates the connections between Thurman and James, he criticizes Thurman's personalistic idealism. Anderson rejects Thurman's assurance that a personal God guarantees comprehensive understanding and unity of all of our experiences. It does not withstand philosophical critiques engendered by the insights of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, or to our experiences of the world as finite and arbitrary. Thus the grotesqueries of life, rather than inner religious subjectivity, should be the starting point for religious reflection.

When religion understands religious experience as the fullness of human life and practices, we can posit a theological concept of God for the ways we negotiate among the world's finitude, possibility, and transcendence. This need not be named God, but the naming of God "gives meaning and value to the whole of human experience in the world because God transcends every particular experience in a unity of experience" (132). The naming of God also expands and enlarges human capacities for moral sympathy. If there is to be any moral and just political community in the temporal world, it depends on our abilities to grasp the gracious potentialities that occur when transcendent possibilities emerge in the midst of tragic and finite occurrences in the world.

Because Anderson appreciates Thurman's explanation of spiritual disciplines and religious devotion, he feels compelled to address the role of religious devotion in his constructive schemata. Given his description of God, religious devotion as adoration or praise towards a personal God will not suffice. For Anderson, religious devotion requires attention to the grotesque of experience. Religious devotion arises when we can celebrate that there *is* transcendence and potentiality in the midst of finitude.

While this description of religious devotion is consistent with Anderson's construction, if there is any significant weakness in the book, it may be found here. Anderson's concept of a nonpersonal God will seem foreign to many African American religious persons. If adequacy to lived experience is a measuring rod for Anderson, herein Anderson may find himself sliding into the alienated consciousness of which he accuses the slave narrative theology project, albeit from a different direction.

In the final chapter, Anderson addresses the concept of human meaning through a discussion of the centers of value in African American religious life.

Anderson challenges the concepts of “home” and “the black church” as *the* centers of value for African American religious experience. He tells intensely personal narratives of how violence interrupts African Americans homes, and how sexual and gender politics render black churches oppressive for many African Americans. This section rings a tragic note as the reader sees how some particularities of lived experience not only diminish our humanity, but also negate some of the most central assertions of black religious studies.

Anderson’s optimism emerges in his concept of “Beloved Community.” Beloved Community occurs in “the concrete actualization of creative exchange with the past, present and future of Christian faith in community” (viii). When we are able to enlarge ourselves beyond the particularities that usually bind us, and live our transcendence, justice and goods in this world of finitude, Beloved Community is present. It is a kind of eschatology. It is the regulative ideal *and* actual events. Because Beloved Community *can* erupt, even in the midst of narratives like those Anderson recounts, he can still name “home” and “black church” as centers of value for African American religious experience. Thankfully, in Anderson’s estimation, there are many other centers of value as well.

In sum, Anderson’s work is a needed and insightful contribution to the fields of liberal theology, philosophy of religion, black theology, and African American religious studies. He deftly weaves together voices that are rarely heard in the same chorus. For those familiar with Anderson’s work, this is the book we have long anticipated. He brings to one volume the critiques of *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, the theoretical groundings of *Pragmatic Theology*, his essay commentaries on sexuality in black religious communities, and concrete narratives from his personal experiences. *Creative Exchange* is a poignant read that will win over its readers to a commitment to “the grotesque” in every academic and personal rendering.

Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis. William David Hart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 244 pp. \$74.95 cloth. (Reviewed by Ed-die S. Glaude, Jr., Princeton University)

Stories, whether we admit it or not, are central to what we do as scholars. The kinds of stories we tell ourselves about our labor in the archives or about the manic and, admittedly lonely, task of writing inform how we take up a particular subject and reflect, in part, the habits that orient us to our work. These stories are personal, intimate accounts of our strengths and insecurities; they indicate the gravity of interests that pull us in a certain direction